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INNOVATION: It's About Time!

During the past few years I've noticed a curious paradox heading its ugly rear among business leaders tooting the horn for innovation. On one hand they want the rank and file to step up to the plate and own the effort to innovate. On the other hand, they are unwilling to grant the people they are exhorting any more TIME to innovate.

Somehow, magically, they expect aspiring innovators to not only generate game-changing ideas in their spare time, but do all the research, data collection, business case building, piloting, project management, idea development, testing, report generation, and troubleshooting in between their other assignments.

Tooth fairy alert!

This is not the way it happens, folks! Not only is this approach unreasonable, it's unfair, unbalanced, and unworkable. You cannot shoehorn game-changing innovation projects into the already overcommitted schedules of your overworked workforce. If you do, it won't be innovation you'll get, only half-finished projects and a whole lot of cranky people complaining to you in between meetings.

Aspiring innovators don't need pep talks. They need TIME. Time to think. And time to dream. Time to collaborate. And time to plan. Time to pilot. And time to test. Time to tinker. And time to tinker again.

That's why Google and 3M give its workforce 20% of their time to work on projects not immediately connected to its core business. That's why W.L. Gore gives its workforce a half day a week to follow their fascinations. That's why Corel instituted it's virtual garage program.

"Dig where the oil is," Edward deBono once said. Indeed! And *where* is the oil? Right beneath the feet of each and every employee who is fascinated by the work they do, aligned with their company's mission, and given enough time to make magic happen.

Need proof? 50% of Google's newly launched features were birthed during this so-called "free time" -- midwived by engineers, programmers, and other assorted wizards happily following their muse.

The fear? If you give people "freedom" they'll end up playing video games and taking 3-hour lunches. Alas, when fear takes over, folks, (the same fear Peter Drucker asked us all many years ago to remove from the workplace), vision is supplanted by *supervision* and all his micromanaging cousins.

Time to innovate is not time wasted. It is time invested. Freedom does not necessarily lead to anarchy. It can lead to breakthrough just as easily. Remember, organizations do not innovate. *People* do. And people need time to innovate. Time = freedom. Freedom to choose. Freedom to explore. Freedom to express. And yes, even freedom to "fail."

If you've hired the right people, communicated a compelling vision, and established the kind of culture that brings out the best in a human being, you are 80% there.

Now all you need to do is find a way to give your people the time they need to innovate.

(And hey, if you've found a way to do this successfully, let us know and we'll share the results with Heart of Innovation readers some time soon.)